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18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
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1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 “Recognize Your Pastor’s Labor”

Intro. God has ordained leadership for the local church. Just as the flock needs a shepherd (1 Peter 5:1-5), so the church family needs a pastor and other leaders. The Thessalonian church was a newly formed church, but some of these new believers had to be appointed to serve as leaders for the new church. There may have been some problems in the relationship between the leaders and others in the church. Perhaps Paul found out that a good number in the church were not following and supporting their leaders. When that is the case, the church will be hindered in its work. The Bible teaches submission to authority, but it should not be grudging submission, but willing submission out of love, appreciation and respect.

Our church was started in 1978 after our first pastor was dismissed by a narrow vote from another church, which then lost about half of its attendees. Zech. 13:7 says, “Strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.” It is a serious matter when a church does not have a good relationship between the pastor and congregation. When that happens, it could primarily be the pastor’s fault, but it could largely be the congregation’s fault for not following the teaching of my Scripture text today.

So the Scripture text that we will look at today is needed by all churches. The average stay at a church for a senior pastor is about four years. I read a poll that stated 40% of pastors say they have considered leaving their pastorates in the previous three months.¹ Did you realize that in 1996 the average pastoral *career* lasted only fourteen years.² Only 1 out of every 10 pastors will actually retire as a pastor.³ There are several reasons for that. Pastors are prone to high rates of burnout. Also, it was reported at one time that 23% of all active pastors in the U.S. had been fired or forced to resign in the past, and many of those pastors quit the ministry completely. Now there are certainly times when a pastor should be dismissed or encouraged to find other work, such as for moral failure or doctrinal unfaithfulness. Yet conflict in pastor/church relations is all too common. This is in spite of the fact that the health and well-being of a church is tied to the well-being and effectiveness of their pastoral leadership (cf. Heb. 13:17b).

Much has been said about a pastor’s responsibility to his church. I preached about that last Sunday. But I’m afraid less is said about a church’s responsibility to their pastor. That is going to be the focus of my text today. Paul is going to point out that we should love and appreciate the leaders of the church, especially the pastors. But before he does, he defines the kind of leader that especially qualifies for such love and appreciation. So notice with me:

I. A DESCRIPTION OF YOUR PASTOR’S WORK

Paul says in v.12, “And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.” As Paul gives this description of certain church leaders, based on Greek grammar⁴ he probably does not have in mind 3 different kinds of church

¹ <http://www.churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/167379-philip-wagner-secret-pain-of-pastors.html/3>.

² George Barna, 1996 Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators.

³ <https://www.pastoralcareinc.com/statistics/>

⁴ The use of only one definite article preceding all three participles points in this direction.

leaders but one type of leader that can be described by all these phrases. So Paul primarily has in mind the pastors of the church, though the principles of this text apply to certain lay leaders as well.

Now let's see what our text says about the kind of leaders that Paul is talking about here in this text. Pastors should strive to follow this pattern of leadership. First:

A. They *Labor* in the Lord's Work - Paul often used this verb (*kopiaio*) when he was thinking of work that required strenuous effort.⁵ He even has in mind labor to the point of exhaustion. Though this word was mainly used of manual labor, Paul used it in reference to the Lord's service. I know first-hand that serving the Lord as a pastor can be strenuous indeed. Though people joke about a pastor only having to work one hour/week, this verse points to a far different reality. Preparing to teach the Bible is hard, mental work. Ecclesiastes 12:12 says, "...much study is wearisome to the flesh." A sermon takes *at least* 5-10 hours to prepare, and some Sunday School teachers spend about that much time to prepare a lesson. I wish I could spend at least 10-15 hours preparing each sermon. Furthermore, visiting the sick, the bereaved, and other visits can be tiresome. When there is a death in the church family, I spend about eight hours visiting the family, preparing the funeral message, and conducting the funeral. Pastors are on call 24 hours/day, 7 days/week, though congregations should respect their day off as much as possible. The administration of the church is tedious, hard work, directing both staff and volunteers. Carrying many spiritual responsibilities can be difficult, and is a labor of love.

According to a 2010 Lifeway survey of Senior Pastors, the average workweek of a pastor was at least 50 hours.⁶ That is the most a pastor *should* work and be fair to his family. Yet another survey stated that 72% of senior pastors report working over 55 hours per week.⁷

So you need to understand how much a pastor labors for the Lord and for you. Also, this verse indicates that the Lord's work is no place for someone who is lazy and looking for an easy life. Don't think of becoming a pastor of the church if you are not willing to work hard. In fact, Paul said in 1 Cor. 15:58 that all of us should be "always abounding in the work of the Lord." Pastors need to lead by example.

Another application of this principle is the fact that one criteria for choosing Christian leaders is that they have a servant spirit and are willing to work hard.

B. They Lead in the Lord's Way – Notice in v.12 that Paul says that they "are over you in the Lord." This word (*proistemi*) *literally* means "to stand before." Thus it means to be at the head of, rule, direct".⁸ It really gives the picture of one leading the way, as others follow. When you are a leader, your job is to take the initiative. The workers are just waiting on direction from you. Any organization needs to have individuals who lead and direct the organization. The verb can also have the nuance of "care for," as a shepherd leads his sheep but he also cares for them.

Yet notice the fact that our leadership is to be "in the Lord." That means two things: First, the *Lord* should be the One who has called them to a leadership position. The church does not need self-appointed leaders, or leaders who are chosen based on worldly criteria. We need leaders that have been called and gifted of God. Secondly, their leadership should be *in line* with

⁵ See 1 Cor. 15:10; Gal. 4:11; Phil. 2:16; Col. 1:29.

⁶ <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/pastors-work-hours-tallied-in-new-survey/>

⁷ <https://www.pastoralcareinc.com/statistics/>, accessed 5/8/21.

⁸ William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT & Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957).

the Lord. The leaders should seek the *Lord's* will and direction. A pastor is an *undershepherd*, who is to take orders from the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 5:3-4a). Their leadership should be consistent with the Word of God. They should be able to say, "Follow me, as I follow the Lord" (cf. 1 Cor. 11:1).

Not many want to take the burden of leadership responsibility. You need to appreciate those who do.

There is a third characteristic of those who are to receive love and support in the congregation:

C. They Admonish with the Lord's Word - This word (*noutheteo*) literally means "to place on the mind." This includes the idea of exhorting based on the teaching of the Word of God. This word has more to do with the application side of teaching. Church leaders should make people mindful of our responsibility to obey God's commands. After all, Jesus said in the Great Commission that to make disciples, we must be "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Mt. 28:20). Yes, pastors are to exhort their members to be doers of the Word, and not hearers only (James 1:22).

The word not only relates to calling on people to do what is right, but also to avoid what is wrong and warn of the consequences. In fact, the word is translated "warn" in v.14, "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly..." Col. 1:28 says, "Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." (Cf. Acts 20:31, 1 Cor. 4:14; 2 Th. 3:15). Thus, this word can also carry the idea of correcting those who have done wrong.

This is often the most difficult assignment of a church leader. I can tell you that I don't like that aspect of my job. Yet that is one way we show true love. Jesus said in Rev. 3:19, "As many as I love, I rebuke..." (cf. Prov. 9:8; 27:5).

This 3-fold description certainly should apply to a pastor, but it also should apply to Sunday School teachers, and other Bible teachers in the church. It also applies to parents. So I call upon you to work hard at your ministry assignment. Be willing to lead, and when you teach, be sure to apply God's Word to people's daily lives. Admonish them to live according to God's Word.

Now we move to the part of the text that applies to the congregation. Note with me:

II. THE DUTIES OF GOD'S PEOPLE TOWARD SUCH PASTORS

I realize that what I am about to say may seem a bit self-serving, but I am preaching this series mainly to prepare you to relate well to your next pastor, as well as other pastors who serve, such as Youth Pastors. Also, this Scripture does have application to other leaders in the church, as I have already noted. Furthermore, since good leaders are a blessing to the congregation, it is in your interest to do what you can to support good leaders. As I said, the well-being of the church depends on the well-being of the congregation's relationship with their leaders, as we shall see later.

So let's consider together 3 responsibilities that the congregation has toward the kind of leaders described in v.12:

A. Recognize Pastors Who Fulfill Their Responsibilities - V.12 says, "And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you..." The word (*eidō*) carries the basic meaning

of either to see, or to know. If the former, it means “to perceive with the eyes; notice; to pay attention to, observe.” That is likely the meaning here. We have a tendency to think primarily about ourselves. We want the attention. The Bible calls upon us to think about others; consider others; recognize others.

Now why would Paul asked believers to take special notice of the pastors of the church? One purpose of noting such leaders would be to imitate their life and teaching. Yet that is not the purpose stated here. Instead, the answer to that question leads to the second duty of my text:

B. Esteem Them Very Highly in Love – In v.13 Paul says, “and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake....” One commentator said, “This may be the greatest failure of congregations today.”⁹ So we are talking about leaders and followers in the church. Yet in some realms of life there is little love between leaders and followers. Too often our political leaders are despised, ridiculed and even hated by the people. Haven’t you noticed that? It seemed like half the country despised Pres. Trump. Now, Pres. Biden is facing the same thing. How sad! People tend to criticize their leaders, and they fail to appreciate what they do. But that worldly spirit should *not* be the case in the Christian church. Paul describes just the opposite here. You see here that if you do not esteem your pastor highly in love, you are disobeying Scripture!

Now let’s unpack what Paul says here. Notice we are “to esteem them.” That means we are to consider or calculate (*hegeomai*) their value.¹⁰ Those who teach and give admonition from the Word of God are so valuable. We are saved by the ministry of the Word. We grow by the ministry of the Word. We are corrected by the ministry of the Word (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17). We are comforted and given hope by the ministry of the Word. Furthermore, where would we be without leaders? We might be able to get by OK for a while, but not as well. Not many are willing to lead. Most don’t want the responsibility. Have you tried to elect a chairman of a committee? And when we find a good leader, we should esteem and respect them all the more!

Then we are to do so “in love.” Leaders who work hard to serve the Lord and His people should be loved by the people.¹¹ I appreciate so much the way the members of the congregation have expressed love to me over the years in various ways. So if you want to keep good leaders, you and I need to obey this admonition of Paul. In the more you express your love for your pastor, the more he will be motivated to serve you.

Now notice how *much* such leadership should be held in loving esteem. “Very highly” (*huperekperissos*) is picturesque in Greek. The last part of the compound word was used of a river overflowing its banks. But here he adds the prefix *huper*, from which we get the word “super.” In Eph. 3:20 this same one word is translated “exceedingly abundantly above.” We should overflow *greatly* in love, appreciation and respect to such pastors. There is nothing wrong with honoring faithful servants of God, so long as God gets the glory. I have initiated steps to doing more of that here. One example is our annual “Faithful Servant Award.”

Now the more a leader fulfills the description in v.12, the more highly they should be esteemed by the congregation. It is dangerous when a church family takes their leaders for granted.

This admonition may be needed now more than ever. Let me tell you one reason why. Today members of the congregation have easy access to some of the best and most gifted

⁹ Holmes, p.189.

¹⁰ This word is used in Php, 3:8, “Yet indeed I also *count* all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord....”

¹¹ 2 Cor. 8:7, “But as you abound in everything ... in your love for us....”

preachers in America. Then they listen to their own pastor and say, “Why can’t he preach like so-and-so?” Does this cause us to lose respect and esteem for our local leaders? We fail to remember that what we see and hear may be professionally edited. There are thousands of faithful pastors who grow discouraged because they see their members drawn to the big churches, or even choose to stay at home and hear Andy Stanley, David Jeremiah, John Hagee, or many other gifted preachers on TV or the Internet. Yet when you are in the hospital, David Jeremiah isn’t going to come and visit you. When your loved one dies, Andy Stanley is it going to minister to you. Or if you need counsel or comfort or personal prayer, other TV preachers will not be there for you. Your local pastor will be there for you, or at least is available if you call on him. I trust your S.S. teacher and deacon will be there for you as well. So let us be more mindful “to esteem them very highly in love” in the days ahead.

Now I want you to think with me how we can esteem such leaders “very highly in love”? I have already shared in this series that you should pray for your pastor, participate and help in his ministry, and give words of encouragement. How else can you obey this command?

1. Support Him Financially – Love gives. Gal. 6:6 says, “Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches.” (Cf. 1 Cor. 9:7-11). Take care of a pastor’s *financial* needs and he will be in a better position to focus on taking care of your *spiritual* needs. Yet 57% of pastors believe they do not receive a livable wage.¹² Then I Tim. 5:17 says, “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.” Yes, “double honor” means to pay them well. A pastor who is doing a good job should get more than a cost-of-living increase if at all possible. A true pastor will be a good steward of what God gives him through the congregation. Then Paul backs his command with Scripture. In v.18 he says, “For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages.’” Make sure he can afford to take his wife out on a weekly date night and can afford to go on a much-needed vacation, yet 78% of pastors report having had their vacation interrupted with ministry duties or expectations.¹³ I want to thank the congregation for supporting me financially over the years.

2. Love His Wife and Family – They are dear to the pastor, and he values the congregation’s love for them. Being a pastor’s wife or a P. K. is not easy, and 80% of pastors believe pastoral ministry has negatively affected their families.¹⁴ So do what you can to make things better for a pastor’s family. Be a friend to his wife and kids. This follows the principles stated by Jesus in Mt. 25:40, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.”

C. Live at Peace with Them – In the last of v.13 Paul says, “Be at peace among yourselves.” Evidently there was some conflict between the leaders and followers in the church, similar to what we see in the political realm of life. Why else would Paul feel a need to write this instruction? Furthermore, the peace that the apostle has in mind is not merely the absence of conflict, but the presence of positive, healthy relationships that produce a sense of well-being.

But when conflict arises, it is usually not just one sided. So he does not say, “Be at peace with them,” but “among yourselves.” This command is equally binding on both pastors and others in the church. We may disagree on policy, procedures, or direction, but let us disagree in a peaceful and respectful manner. Peace can be the result of the church family following the

¹² <https://www.pastoralcareinc.com/statistics/>

¹³ <https://www.pastoralcareinc.com/statistics/>

¹⁴ Ibid.

spiritual leaders. Whenever you find division and dissension in a local church, it is usually because of selfishness and sin on the part of the leaders, or the members, or both. James 4:1-3 makes it clear that selfishness on the inside leads to strife on the outside. It is so easy to allow little things to set one Christian against another. It is only as we submit to one another in the Lord that we can enjoy His blessing, and peace in the family.

I think of poor old Moses. He tried to lead the children of Israel in the right way, but they were always in conflict. They sure made life hard for Moses! It's a wonder he didn't quit, though we tried on some occasions.

Why should you carry out these duties toward the kind of leaders described here? V.13 says we are to love and esteem such leaders "for their work's sake." The battles and burdens in ministry are many, and sometimes the encouragements are few. We are not to esteem church leaders just because they hold an office in the church. We are to think highly of them, not only due to their labor, but also "for their work's sake." The church cannot be expected to do its work effectively if the pastors are not being supported by their fellows. Put the effectiveness of your pastor's ministry ahead of your personal preferences.

Living in peace can be difficult. This means more than replacing conflict with "being nice." It may mean following Mt. 18:15 and going to a person to clear up a matter, seek mutual understanding, and reconcile differences. Let us have more than superficial harmony.

Today is Mother's Day. Can't you see an application to our moms? They have labored for us for countless hours. While growing up they were over us to lead us and to admonish us. They sure have done that! Shouldn't we esteem them very highly in love? Shouldn't we seek to live in peace with our moms?

Conclusion: Our Pastor Search Committee is to pray and diligently seek to recommend God's choice for your next pastor. You will have the opportunity to get to know him and vote. Then, when your church approves the next pastor, I call upon you to remember and follow this Scripture. So for your sake and the sake of the church, let us fulfill these duties of the congregation, especially toward the kind of pastors described in v.12! Will you make that a commitment today?

Sources: James T. Draper, Jr., *1 & 2 Thessalonians: The Hope of a Waiting Church* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1979); Oliver B. Greene, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians* (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, 1964); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: I-II Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955); Matthew Henry *Unabridged Commentary (on Online Bible)*; Michael W. Holmes, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); David A. Hubbard, *Thessalonians: Life that's Radically Christian* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); H.A. Ironside, *Addresses on First and Second Epistles of Thessalonians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1947); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [Ver. 5:30]* (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Warren W. Wiersbe, *"Be" Series: New Testament Volumes 1 & 2, 1 Thessalonians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). No material from Maclaren.

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